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Missing the boat amid floods

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Missing the boat amid floods

On which evidence is planning based and which planning documents are taken as basis for decision-making?

By Dr. Urs Geiser and Dr. Abid Suleri

Pakistan is the land of happening. Things happen here on a fast track and change so rapidly that there is hardly time to learn lessons from a particular event. Same goes true for recent floods. Much of the discussion around the plight of flood survivors has receded with the recession of flood waters. No one is really interested to know what is working and what is not working for flood rehabilitation? And why? In our opinion, one needs to frame some questions and try to explore their answers in order to turn the challenge of floods into a learning opportunity for future disaster preparedness.

Coordinating the delivery of flood reconstruction; having plans ready beforehand (being "prepared"); bringing all the involved stakeholders on board; ensuring the proper operation and maintenance of irrigation structures, creating but also operating and maintaining organisations for disaster preparedness -- all these are facets of governance.

Contrary to government's definition of governance, i.e., planning and decision-making by the state and its institutions, the notion of "governance" takes a societal look. How are decisions made within a certain society or nation? Who is involved in these decision-making processes and who has which powers to decide? On which evidence is planning based and which planning documents are taken as basis for decision-making? How are conflicting views dealt with?

Answers to all of these questions not only determine the quality of governance, but can help in understanding the reason for failure or success of certain interventions.

Present floods in Pakistan challenge the government of Pakistan in an unprecedented manner. The catastrophe challenged the whole governance process which, in turn, affected international pledges for flood reconstruction. One of the many dimensions of this governance crisis is the highly contested nature of local government and related decentralisation processes.

Effective local administrative structures and processes can be an asset in handling not only the emergency phase of a catastrophe such as the floods, but in reconstruction as well. In this regard, though, Pakistan has a very peculiar history.

All efforts at decentralisation took place under military rule, and all of them were abandoned (or grossly "modified") once democratic governments came into power. However, the mere fact that decentralisation in Pakistan mainly occurred under military leadership, should not stop us from having a close look to learn how local actors attempted some mutual agreement at resolving conflict, implementing development schemes and surviving or developing as a community.

In fact, both relief and rehabilitation started through indigenous initiatives taken by local communities at local level. Pity, that their voices and priorities get ignored in

macro scheme of rehabilitation. In such circumstances one often finds supply of relief items without proper need assessment and livelihood interventions framed without understanding the local livelihood assets and activities.

NGOs have been playing an important role since the very beginning of floods in Pakistan. It was good to note that Prime Minister of Pakistan, who earlier had accused them of wasting flood relief donations by 80 percent, later invited their representatives over for a dinner meeting and requested their assistance in flood reconstruction.

Much of the critique on the inefficiency of the government, and of the governance system is known. However, there is an uneasy feeling that leads one to take these criticisms with some specific care -- and this again has to do with evidence. The blames raised against the government need to be assessed carefully. It should be determined that on which criteria, evidence, and against which scale do we blame a government to be inefficient, or efficient for that matter?

We argue that, indeed, the government can be criticised (even blamed) for inefficiencies. The real challenge ahead though is to take these insights as starting points, and to develop, propose and discuss feasible alternatives that help to ensure an effective governance system (including decentralisation) suitable for the conditions of Pakistan. Even the Prime Minister had to publicly ask those who were talking of a change of government to come up with a "substitute" that may work in this country.

Indeed, the media in Pakistan are full these days of demands at a very general level, e.g. that the government should deliver, etc. But how should the government and the governance system operate -- taking into account the experiences made in the past? Is all of what the government does to be blamed, or are there instances where it was able to deliver? And why was it able to deliver in these instances? Indeed, there is an enormous challenge not only on the media and its journalists, but on researchers in the country as well to investigate such issues.

At the very heart of the matter lies the system along which a society or a nation for that matter structures its interactions among the citizens, the related decision-making process, etc, (yet again) "governance" in short. Pakistan is, in principle, a democracy. Or better: it is a democracy-in-the-making. The country has been created as a completely new entity a few decades ago only, and military rule's over-extended periods of time prevented the emergence of the key ingredients that constitute a democratic system: political parties that are accountable to their voters, fair elections that reflect the will of people, an executive and a bureaucracy that delivers, and politicians to bridge their differences at least in moments of catastrophes (such as the present floods), etc.

But the material and non-material benefits expected from democracy do not reach most people. This leaves room open for those that challenge this political system. Earthquake, IDP issues, floods and the way the present state handles the emergency provide these critiques with arguments. They find easy arguments of linking the present governance crisis with the established political system -- a system ("democracy") that has been (in the eyes of many critiques) been imposed on Pakistan by "Western interests".

Indeed, glancing through the debates on flood recovery, one either comes across the blame-game, or its opposite, the praise-game, the latter stating that everything will be good. What seems to be missing is analysis; an attempt to answer some of the questions that we have raised is missing. With Pakistan Development Forum around the corner, one needs to remind our policy makers, journalists, and researchers that it is the understanding of people's livelihood concerns, the state's, civil society's and international donors' response that we consider is the utmost challenge for flood rehabilitation. All of us would have to be ready to address this challenge and contribute towards strengthening good governance, as governance is nothing but a complex process through which a plurality of societal actors aims to formulate and achieve common objectives by mobilizing and deploying a diversity of ideas, rules, and resources.

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